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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000939

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN FM MU'ALLIM'S VISIT TO BAGHDAD: SECURITY IS KEY

REF: A. BAGHDAD 931

IB. BAGHDAD 847

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Classified By: Charge d' Affairs Patricia Butenis for reasons 1.4 (d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (S) Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Mu'allim became the latest high-level visitor to Baghdad March 25-26, following on the heels of Turkish President Gul's visit the day before (Ref A). (Note: Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas subsequently visited Baghdad April 5.) During the two-day visit, Mu'allim met with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (Ref B), Deputy Prime Ministers Barham Saleh and Rafi Essawi, Vice Presidents Adel Mehdi and Tariq al-Hashmi, and Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari. In public comments to the press, GOI officials were generally upbeat about the visit but stressed that improving bilateral security cooperation is critical. Maliki echoed this sentiment in subsequent discussions with the USG, although he expressed his doubts about Syrian sincerity. For his part, Mu'allim publicly voiced the SARG's support for the GOI and called on other Arab states to strengthen ties with Baghdad. The visit marks the latest step in Iraqi-Syrian rapprochement and follows the posting of a Syrian Ambassador to Baghdad in September and of an Iraqi Ambassador to Damascus in late-January. It also set the stage for a meeting between Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and PM Maliki at the annual Arab League Summit in Doha, Qatar on March 30 (Ref C), a meeting that we understand from FM Zebari went well atmospherically. But further improvement in the Iraqi-Syrian relationship will depend on concrete SARG action on critical bilateral security issues as well as GOI action on Syrian priorities including the Kirkuk-Banyas pipeline and increased bilateral trade. End Summary.

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GOI Welcomes Visit; Security the Focus  
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¶2. (U) Press reports following Foreign Minister Mu'allim's meeting with Prime Minister Maliki said Maliki underlined the GOI's "political will to boost relations with Syria in different fields" and said discussions focused on border security, water resources, fuel, and strengthening Arab cooperation. In a short televised interview, Iraqi Government Spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh said "this is a significant visit and a first step that we welcome. We extend our hands to our brother Syrians." Al-Dabbagh added, "There are active groups in Syria, which are not political opposition parties, but those supporting armed groups that kill Iraqis and destroy the Iraqi infrastructure and the Iraqi people." Al-Dabbagh affirmed the GOI's "genuine will" towards developing good bilateral relations but stressed that "security should be the key in developing this relation."

¶3. (U) Foreign Minister Zebari put a decidedly positive spin on the visit during a joint press conference with Mu'allim,

stating "We discussed Iraqi-Syrian relations in detail. We did so cordially, frankly and clearly . . . relations have much improved compared to past years, thanks to the Syrian government's positive response to Iraqi calls to help entrench security and stability . . . true, some Iraqi opposition figures are perhaps active there, but we are a democratic country that understands the meaning of political and unarmed opposition. Do not forget that we, too, lived in Syria for years when we were in the opposition. This is a fact we will not forget."

¶ 4. (C) Zebari told PMIN on March 26 evening that the Syrians had said that they would continue to talk to and host Baathists but they'd look at whatever derogatory security QBaathists but they'd look at whatever derogatory security intelligence about Iraqi Baathists the Iraqi Government wanted to provide. The Syrians, Zebari said, made no specific promises about the borders but Syrian delegation member Nasif claimed that the Syrian Government had shut down several networks funneling fighters into Iraq. Zebari opined that the Syrians' main goal was to get the pipeline to Banyas working again - they accented this in all discussions, Zebari stated. Zebari added that the Syrian PM is scheduled to come to Baghdad again to sign some bilateral cooperation agreements. Zebari opined that the Syrians are still trying to take Maliki's measure as a man who keeps his word or not.

¶ 5. (C) In an April 2 meeting with PMIN, FM Zebari made clear that his public statements were a fairly accurate reflection of how he assessed Mu'allim's visit. He said the visit had set the stage for a friendly meeting between PM Maliki and President Asad on the margins of the Doha Summit, although significant issues remain on both sides. The

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Syrians, Zebari said, are frustrated with Maliki, feel he has not been serious, and believe he has deliberately delayed progress on the Kirkuk-Banyas pipeline issue and on developing bilateral trade relations. Maliki, according to Zebari, is focused on the need for Syria to do more on the security front and has concerns about Iraqi Baathists residing in Syria, issues Maliki stressed both to Mu'allim in Baghdad and Asad in Doha.

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Mu'allim: Greetings and Congratulations from Bashar  
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¶ 6. (U) At the same joint press conference with Zebari, Mu'allim said his visit had been at the behest of President Asad in order "to convey to the brothers in the Iraqi leadership his congratulations and the congratulations of the Syrian leadership and people on the success of provincial elections and the results achieved." He added that he had briefed the results of the four-party summit held in Riyadh so that coordination and consultation can be held with my brother Hoshyar on the best ways to ensure success of the upcoming Doha summit. Responding to a question on internal Iraqi reconciliation dynamics, Mu'allim said, "National reconciliation is first and foremost an Iraqi affair. We do not have specific proposals but good wishes for the attainment of this reconciliation and Syrian willingness to help achieve this goal."

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Maliki Questions Syrian Security Cooperation  
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¶ 7. (S) In his regular weekly meeting with Charge d'Affaires Butenis and MNF-I Commanding General (CG) Odierno on March 27, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki indicated that the Syrian visit was successful in advancing the bilateral relationship (Ref B). Maliki indicated that security is the "magic key" to this relationship. He confirmed that Iraq and Syria will establish two teams to exchange information about insurgents.

However, Maliki noted that whenever Iraq presented Syria with information on insurgent elements operating in Syria, the SARG denied complicity and refused to take action. Separate reporting from Damascus indicates that Syria may finally be serious about addressing joint security concerns (Ref C).

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Comment  
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**¶8.** (S) Cooperation between Syria and Iraq on security issues is a positive indicator of Iraq's expanding sovereignty, demonstrates Iraq's increasing ability to engage neighbors on regional matters, and could serve as a precursor to eventual U.S./Iraqi/Syrian cooperation on regional counterterrorism issues. In the past, the Syrians have been unresponsive to GOI requests for cooperation on combating insurgent elements in Iraq. However, Syria has added incentives to cooperate, as it recently uncovered a Syrian cross-border smuggling network with significant Iraqi ties, and Syria may want Iraqi assistance in countering Saudi support to Sunni extremist elements in Lebanon and Iraq. Also, Syrian action countering Saudi support for legitimate Sunni political activities in Iraq diminishes the Saudi counterweight to Iran. Embassy will encourage the Iraqis on security cooperation, with a watchful eye toward monitoring any actions which could have destabilizing sectarian or political motivations. Without concerted Syrian action against insurgents, we expect Iraq will remain uninterested in seriously engaging with Syria on other bilateral issues.

BUTENIS